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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: SOUTH OSSETIA WEEKEND SHOOTING INCIDENTS

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The situation in the South Ossetian zone of conflict (ZOC) appears relatively calm following a weekend of shooting activity described by an OSCE observer as the worst since 2004, when significant hostilities last broke out between Georgia and South Ossetia. Heavy small arms and machine gun fire, grenade and RPG explosions erupted throughout the ZOC the night of May 12-13, following alternative South Ossetian president Sanakoyev's speech to the Georgian Parliament May 11. Large groups of up to 50 armed Ossetian militia were reported moving through the ZOC, including an OSCE report of a large group headed toward Avnevi, southwest of Tskhinvali. One Georgian policeman and a South Ossetian civilian were wounded, but there were no fatalities.

¶2. (C) According to OSCE, the South Ossetian de-facto authorities have told both the OSCE and the Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) that South Ossetia could not guarantee their safety if they traveled to Avnevi, and there are currently no monitors present in the area. OSCE Ambassador Roy Reeve continues to press the Russian commander of the JPKF, Marat Kulakhmetov, to send a monitoring team to Avnevi.

¶3. (C) On Friday, May 11, Georgian State Minister for Conflict Resolution Merab Antadze met Boris Chochiev, South Ossetian co-chair of the Joint Control Commission, to discuss lifting the South Ossetian blockade on the Transcaucasian Highway, but the talks ended with no result. On May 14, Prime Minister Noghaidei gave a short briefing stressing Georgia's commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflicts and calling on the international community, including Russia, to take a more active role in reducing tensions in the region. End Summary.

Heaviest shooting in ZOC since 2004

¶4. (C) OSCE Security Officer Noah Lane told us that the shooting activity over the weekend was the worst he had seen in the ZOC since major hostilities last erupted between Georgia and South Ossetia in 2004. Heavy fire from small arms and medium machine guns, as well as explosions from grenades and RPGs, were reported. He said that one Georgian policeman and one Ossetian civilian were wounded in the firing, but no one was killed. Lane said that there were reports of large groups of up to 50 Ossetian militia operating throughout the ZOC during the weekend. One large group was reported headed toward Avnevi, a vulnerable Georgian village at the center of the 2004 hostilities. At the time of this report, OSCE officials suspected the militia intended to surround Avnevi. The current status of Avnevi has not been confirmed, however, because the de-facto authorities have refused to allow OSCE or JPKF monitors to enter the area, warning that South Ossetia could not guarantee their safety. South Ossetians turned away JPKF

teams headed to Avnevi twice on May 12. OSCE Ambassador Reeve continues to push JPKF commander Kulakhmetov to send a monitoring team to the area. As of 1800 local time May 14, Kulakhmetov still has not sent another team to try to get to Avnevi. OSCE believes that the militias that deployed over the weekend are still in the field. All visible checkpoints on both sides have been strengthened.

15. (C) Gela Zoziashvili, deputy governor of Shida Kartli, the Georgian region that includes Gori and areas adjoining South Ossetia, told the DCM on May 14 that he thought the shootings were initiated by Kokoiti and not the Russians. Zoziashvili said that South Ossetian militia fired on a Russian JPKF checkpoint at Ergneti, who returned fire. He said that if the Russians had orchestrated the attacks, the Russian peacekeepers would not have been fired on.

Transcaucasian Highway still blocked

16. (C) Hours after the South Ossetians blocked the Transcaucasian Highway May 11, Georgian State Minister for Conflict Resolution Antadze met with South Ossetian JCC co-chairman Boris Chochiev in Tskhinvali to try to lift the blockade. Negotiations failed and the highway is still being blocked by the South Ossetians. Georgian media reported on May 14 that de-facto president Kokoiti was distributing leaflets saying that the Transcaucasian Highway will remain closed until all Georgian forces are withdrawn from South Ossetia.

Sanakoyev addresses the Georgian Parliament

17. (U) The pretext for the South Ossetians' action this

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weekend is apparently the investiture of Dmitry Sanakoyev as head of the newly formed Georgian administrative unit for South Ossetia May 10. Speaking to the Georgian Parliament May 11, Sanakoyev lamented the effects of violence on South Ossetia and its people. He recalled his role in the early fight with Georgia, blaming both sides for grave mistakes and blaming Russia (and the Soviet Union before it) for practicing a policy of "divide and rule." He called for direct dialogue between Georgians and Ossetians and stressed the role of the EU in building trust and reviving the region economically. He said that compromises will be necessary. The de facto government and Russia, he said, understand this and therefore will try to provoke hostilities and suppress every effort to restore trust. He offered the Ossetian people a vision of peace, which he described as "real freedom," while he asked the Georgian government for broad autonomy and guarantees of political representation and cultural identity inside Georgia. This must be preceded and followed by joint social and economic projects, he said.

18. (C) The diplomatic corps, including Ambassador Tefft, EU heads of mission, and OSCE Ambassador Reeve, attended the speech. A few hours before the speech, Reeve admitted to Ambassador that the Georgian decision to legitimize Sanakoyev had gotten OSCE "off the hook," permitting Reeve to "shake hands" with Sanakoyev officially. Reeve said he hoped that the Georgians, after pushing hard to get to this stage, would now slow down and allow Sanakoyev to build a local base of support. Reeve said Sanakoyev's own people had indicated during informal contacts with OSCE that they need time to establish themselves.

19. (U) On May 14, Prime Minister Noghaidei gave a short briefing reiterating Georgia's commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflicts. He said that the GoG has intensified its dialogue with Sanakoyev's government, but was ready to talk with all parties. He accused de-facto president Kokoiti of raising tension in the conflict zone and called on the international community, including Russia, to

take a more active role in defusing the situation.

Comment

¶10. (C) It is not surprising that the de facto authorities have gone on the offensive in the wake of Georgia granting legitimate status to Sanakoyev; the question is how far they are willing to push it. From all outward indications, the Russians are attempting to restrain the South Ossetians. During a lunch meeting with Ambassador and DCM May 11, OSCE's Reeve received a phone call from Russian negotiator Yuri Popov, who said Yuri Zubakov, deputy secretary of the Russian Security Council, was attempting to contact Kokoiti to tell him to "cool it." The best-case scenario is that the de facto authorities feel they have made their point -- by rattling sabers to show they remain a strong force -- and now can begin to step back from the brink. A key sign that this may be the case would be if they permit OSCE and JPKF monitors back into Avnevi and the rest of the conflict zone. The worst-case scenario is that they will launch even more serious attacks in an attempt to provoke the Georgians into a major conflict.

TEFFT